



China Perspectives

2009/4 | 2009

Religious Reconfigurations in the People's Republic of China

Laurence Roulleau-Berger and Guo Yuhua, Li Peilin, Liu Shiding (eds.), *La nouvelle sociologie chinoise* (New Chinese Sociology)

Paris, CNRS Editions, 2008, 500 pp.

Aurore Merle



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4958>

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2009

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Aurore Merle, « Laurence Roulleau-Berger and Guo Yuhua, Li Peilin, Liu Shiding (eds.), *La nouvelle sociologie chinoise* (New Chinese Sociology) », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2009/4 | 2009, Online since 13 January 2010, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4958>

This text was automatically generated on 28 October 2019.

© All rights reserved

Laurence Roulleau-Berger and Guo Yuhua, Li Peilin, Liu Shiding (eds.), *La nouvelle sociologie chinoise* (New Chinese Sociology)

Paris, CNRS Editions, 2008, 500 pp.

Aurore Merle

- 1 Banished from academia for nearly three decades, sociology was reborn in China in the late 1970s and was co-opted by the authorities in the country's modernisation programme. *La nouvelle sociologie chinoise* goes beyond recounting the reconstruction process to present the state of contemporary Chinese sociology through 15 articles and authors deemed representative of the field of research. However, the book is not limited to compiling the big names in "new Chinese sociology": Two long introductions presenting original viewpoints – one external, that of Laurence Roulleau-Berger, and the other Chinese, the collective voice of Guo Yuhua, Liu Shiding, and Li Peilin – shed precious light on the challenges of the discipline's development in China. Roulleau-Berger, a French sociologist, shows the points of contact and common affiliations between research carried out in China and that in France or Europe as a whole; but she also highlights the movement and the process of hybridisation as well as the "epistemological gaps" (p. 52) between diverse sociological forms and practices, opening the path to comparative reflection. Guo, Liu, and Li, for their part, stress the extent of the Chinese sociologists' "mission," as much academic as social, faced with a "transition" deemed as "unparalleled in the history of modernisation worldwide, due to the immense size of the population affected, the speed as well as the scope of the changes" (p. 84).
- 2 How to observe and analyse the social transformations? The book is constructed around three major domains or questions: the market, the city, and the state; to these is added a fourth more reflective part devoted to the modes of production of sociological knowledge in China. What does the market economy orientation represent,

and what has been the impact of economic reforms on Chinese society? The first part offers diverse elements of response. Sun Liping reconsiders the theories of modernisation and development in light of post-communist transitions in order to shed light on the specificity of the route China has chosen. Li Lulu and Li Chunling offer contrasting visions of China's social stratification, one stressing the crystallisation of inequalities since the 1990s, the other extending the historical horizon to the pre-reform period and pointing out that upward and downward mobility go hand-in-hand. The micro-sociological studies by Liu Shiding and Tong Xin reflect the complexity of the changes studied. Liu proceeds from an examination of the structure of property rights in township and village industries to illustrate the "interwoven roles of administrative adaptation, financial incentives, ideology, relationship links and local government legislation" (p. 213); Tong analyses workers' protests against the privatisation of state firms to draw attention to the traditional resources used by some social categories and the forms of collective resistance mounted against certain changes. The second part of the book focuses on cities, examining urbanisation through paradoxes such as those revealed by Li Peilin's study of "urban villages" as "'floating spaces' within cities, with an urban body and a rural heart" (p. 239); or its effects, as shown by Li Youmei's analysis of the transformation of the Pudong area in Shanghai. Shen Yuan considers the consequences of urban housing reform and the emergence of a "housing class" (p. 307), highlighting citizens' "rights protection movements" collectively facing up to the "alliance between the state and the market" (p. 308), and perceiving in these new "urban movements" the emergence of a form of civil society.

- 3 Politics, which looms large over these diverse analyses, is specifically dealt with in the third part of the book, notably the reconfiguration of state-society relations. Anthropologist Guo Yuhua stresses the importance of the regime's symbolic dimension and describes how new state-sponsored rites were initiated by the Communist Party during campaigns for "pouring out grievances," replacing traditional rural rites. Tang Jun looks into the transformations of clans in northern China since 1949, revealing not their disappearance but rather their mutation from formal to informal organisation. Zhang Jing, for her part, explores through public discourses and three criminal cases at different points of time the evolution of the rationale and norms of legitimation in society.
- 4 Apart from the diversity of angles, the analytical aims, and the theoretical references generated by the authors, this collection's value lies in showing the complexity of recent changes in Chinese society and in breaking with classical dichotomies and traditional analyses of reforms as well as evolutionist perspectives. Detailed observations of institutions and their workings and of different categories of social actors and their interactions, as well as the analyses of change mechanisms, help illuminate the complex and often contradictory processes of differentiation within the state and society underway since the start of reforms. It is interesting to note here the apparent paradox between Chinese society's historical and sociological "strength" as revealed in these analyses, on the one hand, and the concern over the need to "build" or "produce" the kind of society described in the introduction, on the other.
- 5 This paradox translates into reality the complex relationship between sociology and society, a relationship that is at once an object and a project. From this viewpoint, the book's fourth part offers some elements for comprehension, with Chen Yingying presenting a critical reflection on sociological inquiry since 1980, Luo Hongguang

looking into anthropology's trajectory in China, and Yang Yiyin adopting a psycho-social approach to understanding the formation of "us" among the Chinese. Finally, Michel Wieviorka offers a valuable insight into the development of this social science in China, neither "aligned" with Western sociologies nor "walled in" within a Sino-centric perspective (p. 489), and maintaining a "subtle link to the authorities" (p. 491). All these elements further stoke interest in the political and social conditions of the discipline's renewal, and raise the question of sociologists' role and engagement in China, opening the way to new exchanges and debates.

6 Translated by N. Jayaram